NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

The Changing Nature of Credibility: From Interest to Instrument to Vital Interest

or

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love "the Box"

Christopher D. Carey/ Class of 1999

Course Number 5603

Seminar C

April 26, 1999

Faculty Seminar Leader.

Lt Col Mark Clodfelter

Faculty Advisor:
Dr. David Tretler

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
26 APR 1999		**26-04-1999 to 26-04-1999**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
The Changing Nature of Credibility: From Interest to Instrument to Vital Interest or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love 'the Box'	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
see report

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**		**14**	

. . . the only option worse than no option would be having an option that would be . . . threatened but which there was not political consensus to carry . . . out

– GEN. HARRY SHELTON, 15 APRIL 1999

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction

Every nation has an abstract interest in its reputation for prestige or credibility. A nation's leaders frequently rely on that reputation as a necessary element of statecraft. This prestige, or credibility, can be transformed from an instrument of statecraft into a vital national interest when a statesman's reliance on it is insufficient to influence another actor in the desired manner. American experience demonstrates that this elevation of the importance of credibility can result from too strong a focus on U.S. military capacity and insufficient attention to the interests and perceptions of the adversary. It is not at all clear that the U.S. interest in preserving its reputation for credibility can ever successfully be advanced through the application of military force to a specific situation. This question will become more relevant as the U.S. more aggressively pursues value-based interests, which traditionally have been viewed as interests of lesser intensity. This lesser intensity results in reduced U.S. credibility in regard to those interests and should affect the manner of statecraft used in the pursuit

of those interests.[1]

II. What is a Vital Interest

Donald Nuechterlein's prioritization of national interests based on their intensity[2]frames current debate on the topic. He placed those interests essential to national survival at the top of the hierarchy followed in order by vital interests, major interests, and peripheral interests. Survival interests generate little discussion due to their nature and relative clarity.[3] In contrast, the term "vital interest" is used with such frequency and applied so irregularly that it has been rendered almost meaningless by the many ways in which it is used. The concept itself, however, retains significant importance, particularly in the post Cold-War U.S., where interests of lesser intensity are frequently pursued. Every nation, must remain mindful that some interests are supreme to others and recognize that it may at times be necessary to sacrifice lesser interests for the sake of greater interests.

An objective means of determining in advance which interests will be considered vital at any given time has proven elusive. At times the term "vital interest" seems to be defined the same way that Justice Potter Stewart defined pornography; "I can't describe it, but I know it when I see it." Obviously, such a definition is unsatisfactory to scholars of international relations who have struggled with the term. Interestingly, the most common usage of the term "vital interest" relies on the means -- specifically the use of military force -- that will be used to advance the interest in question. [4] Such a

---

[1] This paper focuses on the deterrent/coercive relationship between one nation, for the most part the U S , and another nation, or 'the adversary.' It is recognized that the interests and perceptions of allies affect a nation's credibility and that that credibility may be applied in relation to more than one adversary at a time. For purposes of clarity and brevity, these considerations will not be explicitly addressed in the text. Similarly, discussion of NATO's credibility in the Kosovo situation or the credibility of any alliance is avoided. To the extent that it is possible to talk about the collective credibility of an alliance or coalition rather than about the credibility of the individual nations in question, it is noted that the concerns will be similar to the concerns of the U.S. that are discussed in this paper Difficulties in achieving consensus will increase as the relationship between the situation at hand and traditional considerations of security become more remote.

[2] Donald E Nuechterlein, *America Recommitted: United States National Interests in a Restructured World* (The University Press of Kentucky 1991) 19-21

[3] For example the 1997 National Military Strategy (hereinafter 1997 NMS) lists only three categories vital, important, and humanitarian. The latter two categories are roughly comparable to Nuechterlein's major and peripheral categories.

[4] *See e.g ,* Bernard Brodie, *War & Politics* (MacMillan Publishing Co., New York 1973) 342 Brodie

definition is confusing for a number of reasons. First, it creates a potential for interests of the highest importance to be considered non-vital, because they are not capable of advancement through military means. Conversely, it may render interests of lesser relative importance "vital" because the use of the military instrument is seen as a primary means of securing those interests. In other words, the term can become self-defining. The statement that a vital interest is one over which we are willing to fight [5] provides little clarity in light of the still popular "Weinberger Doctrine," which stated that the U.S. would will only use its military troops when vital interests were involved.

Rejecting the popular means-based definitions, this paper will modify the definition advanced by Nuechterlein. An interest will be considered vital if it is "so important to a nation's well being that its leadership refuses to compromise . . . and [over which the leadership is] willing to risk economic or military [losses]."[6] This definition has two advantages. First, to some degree, it avoids the "tail wagging the dog" aspects of determining the intensity of a nation's interest by the means that are chosen to advance that interest. Second, the intensity of the interest is directly related to the nation's well being. Thus, some objective means of assessing an interest is provided. Finally, the discussion of political leadership's willingness to compromise underscores that a nation's vital interests are not all immutable. Instead, the importance of an interest is subject to the perceptions of political leadership and is capable of being elevated by the personal interests of the political leadership in question. This paper focuses on the elevation of credibility to the status of a vital national interest, particularly within the U.S. where political leadership frequently changes.

---

states that vital interests are commonly defined as those interests that we are "ready to fight to preserve Brodie rejects this definition as unsuitable. It should be noted that the commonly accepted definition is not the official view within the United States The 1997 NMS, *see* note 2, state that military force may be appropriate to advance all three levels of interests

[5] Elmer Plischke, *Foreign Relations: Analysis of its Anatomy* (New York: Greenwood Press 1988) 54

[6] Donald E Nuechterlein, *America Recommitted: United States National Interests in a Restructured World* (The University Press of Kentucky 1991). 19-20.

III. Credibility – The Interest that Acts Like an Instrument

A. From an Interest to an Instrument . . .

For purposes of discussion, a nation's credibility can be defined as the international perception of that nation's ability to protect and advance its interests and its willingness to use military force to do so.[7] National credibility is a relevant term in both the general and the specific sense. That is, every nation possesses in the abstract a reputation for its level of commitment to its interests. Sometimes called prestige,[8] this reputation is in large part based on the resources that the nation devotes to its military capacity[9] and on its demonstrated willingness to use that capacity. It is a valuable intangible asset that any nation has an interest in preserving and enhancing. Importantly, this interest comprises an essential, latent element of several of the instruments in the tool bag of any statesman.

An ambassador who relies on coercive diplomacy, a general who orchestrates a show of force, or even a legislative body that ratifies a defense treaty relies on national credibility. This reliance converts credibility, at least in the short term, from an interest to be maintained through statecraft into an instrument to be used in statecraft. That is, the abstract reputation is used in a manner designed to influence the actions of another nation. As indicated by the examples provided above, when it is used as a tool of statecraft, credibility generally takes the form of a threat, promising punishment[10] for failure to comply with the desires of the threatening nation. Its purpose is to either deter international actor(s) from taking an action that the statesman wishes to prevent or to coerce an action that the statesman desires.[11] Thus, credibility is used as a

---

[7] Frank G. Hoffman, "Decisive Force. A New American Way of War?" *Strategic Review* (Winter 1995) 26, David Jablonsky, "The Persistence of Credibility Interests, Threats and Planning for the Use of American Military Power," *Strategic Review* (Spring 1996)· 7-15.

[8] *See* Brodie, *War and Politics,* note 3.

[9] A distinction is drawn between military "capacity" or power in the abstract, and military "capability" or applied power Further elaboration of this distinction is made in the text below

[10] This paper focuses on situations in which the threatened punishment is the use of military force. Of course, frequently the threat could involve non-military means (*e.g.,* economic sanctions) This type of threat, while certainly placing national credibility at stake, does not seem to possess the same potential to turn that credibility into a vital interest

[11] For instance, the issuance of the Truman Doctrine and SEATO placed U.S credibility on the line with the purpose of deterring any communist advance in Southeast Asia More recently, diplomatic efforts surrounding the situation in Kosovo were heavily reliant on the threat of U S military intervention to stop

means to achieve a political objective of deterrence or coercion which, in turn, is intended to serve some underlying national interest. When applied as an instrument, the nature of credibility changes significantly.

B. . . . That is Ultimately Controlled by the Adversary

Credibility as applied to a specific situation has been defined as a product of a nation's capability to influence other international actors and its perceived willingness to use that capability.[12] The change in definition that must be stressed at the outset is the use of the term "capability" rather than "capacity." While capacity addresses pure power, capability entails the application of that power.[13] In the abstract, it is possible to speak only of *capacity* or raw power. However, in any given situation, it is the *capability* to apply that power in a manner that will alter the actions of the adversary that is relevant.

The first step in evaluating the ability to influence another actor is an assessment of that actor's underlying motivations for taking the action in question. Such a consideration will help the statesman avoid trying to deter the inevitable or to coerce the improbable.[14] If the interest of the adversary is immune to external influence, considerations of credibility are irrelevant.

Even if some potential for influence does exist, the statesman is faced with the exceedingly difficult task of assessing his own nation's ability to exert that influence. As indicated above, when used as an instrument, one nation's credibility is another nation's threat. The threat perceived by a nation has been defined as a function of that nation's assessment of its vulnerability to the threatening nation's capability and intent to use

---

and deter ethnic violence. Depending on the instrument of statecraft used, *e.g.,* alliance versus direct diplomacy, the ease of identifying all of the nations that credibility is employed against will vary

[12] David Jablonsky, "The Persistence of Credibility: Interests, Threats and Planning for the Use of American Military Power," *Strategic Review* (Spring 1996): 7-15. See also Hoffman, Decisive Force article

[13] *Webster's Second New World International Dictionary, unabridged* (Springfield, Massachusetts 1960): 396.

[14] It is not possible, particularly at this early juncture, to evaluate President Milosevic's reasons for not accepting the terms offered at Rambouillet. However, it is quite likely that the U.S and its allies failed to recognize the intensity of interest felt both by Milosevic and by the Serbian people in the retention of Kosovo. Similarly, the U.S. and its allies failed to recognize the obligations felt by the North Vietnamese to free their southern brethren from perceived colonial domination

that capability.[15] Although this essentially restates the credibility equation from another vantage, it highlights the need to evaluate the adversary's assessment of the intensity of its own interests at stake and the perceived ability of the threatening nation to target those interests. These perceptions and assumptions ultimately determine the success or failure of any effort to deter or coerce.[16] A determination by an adversary, even if it is unreasonable, that the threatened military action will not be able to effectively target his interests will cause an effort to deter or coerce to fail.

A final consideration in the specific application of credibility is the adversary's evaluation of a threatening nation's willingness to actually take the threatened action. In making this assessment, the adversary will evaluate the intensity of the threatening nation's interest that is at stake. Credibility is heavily dependent on the adversary's perception of the importance of those interests to the threatening nation. The adversary will consider this assessed intensity in light of general assumptions about the resolve of the threatening nation in forming his perception of that nation's willingness to take the threatened measures.

C. . . . Who Has the Ability to Turn it Back Into a (Vital) Interest

An obvious conclusion from the foregoing discussion is that credibility is in the eyes of the beholder. An adversary has the ability to unilaterally change the definition of credibility from capability x *perceived* willingness to capability x *actual* willingness. In the face of such a challenge to its credibility, a nation may determine that it has an interest in taking action to bolster that credibility. Because the threat to credibility has arisen as a result of a threat to use military force, the most readily available means of advancing the interest is to use the force threatened. In this situation, credibility is certainly treated as a vital interest under the most common usage of the term. Interestingly, the nation uses military force with the political objective of demonstrating

---

[15] Richard K Betts, "Intelligence Warning Old Problems, New Agendas," *Parameters* (Spring 1998). 30 Betts actually posits the equation that a threat is equal to the product of an adversary's capability multiplied by his intentions Respected military scholars and all around good guys have noted that this fails to adequately consider the threatened nation's perception of its interests at stake and the vulnerability of those interests

[16] Richard K Betts, "What will it Take to Deter the United States?", *Parameters* (Winter 1995-96): 70-79

specific credibility as a means of preserving the national, perhaps vital, interest of *general* credibility.

IV. Credibility as a Vital Interest

A. Chasing the Dog's Tail?

When military force is used in the pursuit of general credibility, the possibility of a mismatch between the end desired and the means used to pursue that end exists. As indicated above, when it successfully demonstrates specific credibility, a nation shows that it is willing to use and capable of using military force in a specific manner and circumstance against a defined enemy for a particular interest. Such a successful demonstration can, to some extent, be analogized to other interests and situations. However, the analogy is by no means perfect. An adversary will always assess capability and willingness in light of its specific situation. The effect on general credibility is not only uncertain; the ultimate determination of this effect can only be made by potential future adversaries.

An unsuccessful use of military force, on the other hand, demonstrates, first and foremost, a lack of capability. Additionally, while it certainly shows a nation's willingness "to put its money where its mouth is" in a given situation, the fact that the use of the military was unsuccessful may affect that willingness (or the perception of that willingness) in the future. For instance, there can be no doubt that the 'Vietnam Syndrome' has affected both subsequent U.S. willingness to use force and the international perception of that willingness. Thus, while the effect on general credibility of a successful use of force in a given situation is uncertain, the impact of unsuccessful military action is almost certainly negative.

B. Can the U.S. <u>Ever</u> Strengthen its Credibility by Using Force?

As stated above, general credibility or prestige is a product of a nation's military capacity and the willingness to use that capacity. The most credible nation imaginable would be one that was known to possess overwhelming capacity and was able to inspire certainty about its willingness to use that force effectively in support of any of its

interests. Lacking the ability to inspire certainty on either or both elements, a nation's credibility is best served by maintaining as high a degree of probability as possible.

The U.S. has no military peer competitor. By far outspending any other nation in the world in order increase its overwhelming military superiority, the U.S. makes a direct investment in its general credibility. U.S. military might is so overwhelming that it fosters an international perception that it is, in the abstract, capable of accomplishing any militarily attainable objective. Thus, there is very little in the way of credibility to be gained from a demonstration of U.S. military capability. Success is expected and pre-existing impressions are merely reinforced. On the other hand, if the use of force is unsuccessful, U.S. credibility will suffer any appearance of omnipotence is lost.

While U.S. military capacity is regarded with a sense of certainty, the willingness to use that capacity is known to be highly variable. The executor of U.S. willingness is the president. The supremacy of the Executive Branch in matters of foreign policy and the willingness of Congress to remain "out of the loop" in the early stages of decision making regarding military action give the Administration relatively free rein in those decisions. Thus, in the short term, the intensity of a specific American interest and the willingness of the U.S. to act upon that interest are determined by the Administration.

The president does not operate in a vacuum, however. Ultimately, willingness will depend on the President's ability to develop public consensus that the interest is "so important to a nation's well-being"[17] that the president's proposed actions are justified. This is the nature of a representative democracy. Political will, which takes a longer term perspective than willingness, ultimately rests with the people, who have the ability to shape the actions of the president or to remove the president from office based on a dissatisfaction with the actions that he has taken.

This distribution of power, when combined with the openness of U.S. society, provides an adversary strong advance indication of U.S. willingness. Generally, there is very little mystery about the view of the U.S. public with regard to the intensity of a specific interest. Formal and informal public debate as well as public opinion polls usually provide a clear indication of the views of the populace, Congress, and other

---

[17] Reference is made both to Nuechterlein's definition of "vital interest", *see* note 1, and the definition

opinion leaders. This transparency will almost certainly have a direct effect on U.S. credibility. Credibility will be enhanced in situations where support for military action is readily available. However, when public consensus on the use of force is hard to come by, an adversary will likely perceive a lack of U.S. willingness, which will result in greatly reduced credibility.

As indicated, willingness is in the hands of the president, who has the ability, in the short term to act in a manner that is inconsistent with popular opinion. The importance of public and congressional opinion in directing the action that a President will take varies with the President in question. President Clinton, for instance, throughout his Presidency has demonstrated a tendency to allow public opinion to determine his actions. The President's loss of personal credibility has been so significant that domestic political considerations have led him to openly state that his willingness to use force in the Kosovo situation is very limited. The ironic result is that these statements have been made to the significant detriment of national credibility just as that credibility has been represented by the Administration as a vital interest. Other presidents have had personal and domestic political reasons for showing willingness that was not necessarily tied to popular opinion. President Bush's desire to escape the 'wimp factor' likely played a part in his willingness to repel the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Regardless of the rationale for diverging from public opinion in a specific situation, the president demonstrates his own willingness to use force rather than the resolve of the U.S. This will bear upon U.S. credibility while that president remains in office. However, it will have very little direct effect on an adversary's perceptions of U.S. general credibility under future administrations. The most significant effect on general U.S. credibility will be on the capability side of the equation and will depend on the degree of success of the military action.[18]

C. Credibility as a Vital U.S. Interest, Past and Future

The U.S. has a history of misperceiving its international credibility as applied to specific circumstances. In Korea, Vietnam, Kuwait, and now in Kosovo, another

---

advanced in this paper

[18] For instance, the "Vietnam Syndrome" discussed previously affected future administrations

international actor has acted inconsistently with U.S. wishes directly in the face of a threat of U.S. military force. In at least two of these circumstances, Vietnam and Kosovo, the desire to appear credible on the international stage has been a stated, primary rationale for military intervention. Thus, under any definition of the term, credibility has been treated as a vital interest.

From General Curtis LeMay's strategy of bombing the North Vietnamese "back to the stone age" to Sandy Berger's plan to bomb Serbia some more if bombing is unsuccessful, U.S. leadership has betrayed a tendency to focus on military capacity rather than on military capability. In discussing what he called the "western way of war," Lawrence Freedman stated that western countries assume that they are able not only to choose their enemies but that they can also force those enemies to fight on "western" terms.[19] He could have gone further to state that the U.S. assumes that it will face enemies who fear, and would suffer, the costs of war in the same manner as the U.S. That is, the U.S. tends to impute its values and perceptions to its adversaries. When this happens, the threat of military force is not accompanied by sufficient consideration of the relative intensity of the adversary's interests that are at stake and whether the adversary is capable of being influenced.[20]

The U.S. focus on capacity is understandable. It is quantifiable and is well known to U.S. policy makers. Further, as stated above, it is military capacity that forms the basis for the U.S. prestige in general. The failure of U.S. statesmen to move from the general to the specific (from capacity to capability) in applying U.S. credibility as an instrument of statecraft is simply a demonstration of the old adage that to a hammer every problem is a nail. A focus on capacity allows the U.S. to play to its strength and provides a tempting way of avoiding the difficult aspects of evaluating the application of that capacity to the situation at hand.

Despite the historic over-reliance on military capacity, the general uncertainty

---

[19] Lawrence Freedman, *The Revolution in Strategic Affairs,* Adelphi Paper 318 (New York Oxford University Press, 1998): 77

[20] For instance, it seems clear that successive presidential administrations failed to adequately assess the interest of the North Vietnamese in rescuing their brethren in the south from further intervention by a colonial power. Similarly, the historical importance of Kosovo to the Serbian people and its personal importance to President Milosevic as a source of his power appears to have been given insufficient weight

surrounding U.S. willingness to use that capacity indicates that the defining aspect of U.S. credibility as we enter the 21st century will be the willingness to use military force. The aversion of the American public to U.S. casualties and the insistence that U.S. use of force be carefully controlled with minimal collateral damage is well known and may be interpreted by an adversary as an indication of a lack of U.S. resolve. A more appropriate interpretation requires a consideration of the U.S. interest at stake.

V. "Thinking Outside of the Box" or Biting off More than the U.S. Public is Willing to Chew?

With the end of the Cold War, direct and realistic threats to U.S. survival interests were essentially eliminated for the short term. Moreover, this rapid climb up Maslow's hierarchy of needs reduced many of the existing threats to interests that were deemed vital. The freedom created for U.S. security strategists by the reduction of serious threats has led to more aggressive pursuit of U.S. interests. For example, under the Bush administration, the use of military force was reserved for the protection of vital interests. Under President Clinton, the explicit policy is to use military force as deemed appropriate in the pursuit of the entire range of U.S. interests – vital, important, and humanitarian.[21] The elimination of traditional security threats has encouraged "outside of the box" thinking – not just about how to pursue national interests but about the interests that will be pursued.

In 1973, Bernard Brodie warned that the use of force for lesser interests is necessarily constrained by public will, which demands that the level of force applied be proportional to the purpose sought.[22] Flip comments attributed to members of the Clinton Administration questioning the worth of the world's greatest military when that military is not available for use in offensive and humanitarian related operations cause a concern that the Administration's definition of security has outstripped the public will. The term "vital interest" has been defined as necessarily defensive[23] and the concept of credibility has been stated to be inapplicable to offensive actions and to situations

---

[21] 1997 National Military Strategy, page 12
[22] *See* Brodie, *War and Politics,* note 3 at 358
[23] *Ibid.* at 344.

involving the "vindication of moral principles."[24]

Given the lesser intensity of important and humanitarian needs, it is likely that the Administration will have difficulty gaining public consensus for a specific use of force in support of some of those interests. Threat based statecraft, exemplified by style of coercive diplomacy demonstrated at Rambouillet makes it likely that the use of force will be preceded by threats. Unless the U.S. conducts a more careful analysis of its own credibility than it has in the past and tailors its threats in accord with this analysis, it is likely that U.S. credibility will be placed at stake. If history can be considered a guide, the need to preserve that credibility will be cited as the justification for the use of military force. This paper has demonstrated that the ability to enhance general U.S. credibility through the use of force in a given circumstance is questionable.

VI. Conclusion

Skepticism is justified any time that the preservation of credibility is used as a justification for the use of U.S. military force. America traditionally has been too enamored of its military and technological capacity in evaluating the international influence it wields. Although it may be the indispensable nation, it is a mistake to throw the weight of the U.S. around without ensuring that a threatened action can effectively target the adversary's interest in a manner that the public will support. In conducting this evaluation, it is necessary to remember that our adversaries will understand us far better than we will ever understand them. Because the use of credibility as a means of statecraft relies so heavily on understanding your adversary and anticipating his actions, this imbalance makes reliance on U.S. credibility as an instrument of statecraft a particularly difficult venture.

---

[24] Michael Mandelbaum, "Is Major War Obsolete?" *Survival* (Winter 1998-99)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

Bernard Brodie, *War & Politics* (MacMillan Publishing Co., New York 1973)

Donald E. Nuechterlein, *America Recommitted: United States National Interests in a Restructured World* (The University Press of Kentucky 1991).

Elmer Plischke, *Foreign Relations: Analysis of its Anatomy* (New York: Greenwood Press 1988).

Articles

Richard K. Betts, "Intelligence Warning: Old Problems, New Agendas," *Parameters* (Spring 1998).

Richard K. Betts, "What will it Take to Deter the United States?", *Parameters* (Winter 1995-96).

Lawrence Freedman, *The Revolution in Strategic Affairs,* Adelphi Paper 318 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Frank G. Hoffman, "Decisive Force: A New American Way of War?" *Strategic Review* (Winter 1995).

David Jablonsky, "The Persistence of Credibility: Interests, Threats and Planning for the Use of American Military Power," *Strategic Review* (Spring 1996).

Michael Mandelbaum, "Is Major War Obsolete?" *Survival* (Winter 1998-99).